

Bering Land Bridge National Preserve Archeology Questions and Answers

What is archeology?

Archeology is the scientific study of the human past. Archeologists study things people left behind called artifacts. Artifacts can be fascinating, but archaeologists are much more interested in the information the artifacts contain. Archeology can also contribute to modern society by telling us how humans adapted to their environments in the past and how they adapted to changes such as climate change.

What is an archeological site?

Mention archeology and most people think of the Egyptian Pyramids or Stonehenge, but there are many places and objects that can be considered archeological.

A site is any location that contains evidence of past human activity. Archeologists have found that people have been in Alaska for at least 14,000 years. Some of the oldest archeological sites in North America are located in Alaska. While archeologists have learned a great deal about the prehistory of Alaska, they've barely scratched the surface of understanding who lived in different areas and when. Archeologists are just starting to understand how various cultural groups adapted to extreme environments and rapid environmental changes through time. The story of how people first came to Alaska, and by what means, is a remarkable and fascinating one that is far from complete, and may never be due to the vast, remote and dynamic landscape.

What is an artifact?

An artifact is any object from an archeological site that displays human modification. This can include finished tools or the debris created by making tools. Artifacts can tell interesting stories, but this story is richer if the location of the artifact in a site is known. Did the artifact come from someone's house or from their garbage? What types of artifacts were found nearby? These are some of the questions archeologists ask.

Why are archeological sites important?

Throughout the world, the period of written history is very brief. There are many thousands of years for which there is no written record. Northwest Alaska has been inhabited for more than 12,000 years. For many long periods of human history, archeological sites are the only source of information. Also, sites contain important geological and biological information that is difficult or impossible to find elsewhere. Archeological sites are like library books. They are accumulations of information, and each holds a unique story.

Who owns archeological sites and artifacts?

Archeological sites and the artifacts they contain belong to the owner of the land on which they occur. In Alaska, artifacts found in the tidal zone (on the beach) or on submerged lands belong to the State. It is also important to recognize that Native American people feel very strong ties to materials made by their ancestors. To many, these artifacts are sacred and belong to the Native community.

Who can dig an archeological site?

All professional archeologists arrange permits before conducting any excavation or collection. These permits state how materials will be obtained and where they will be stored.

Under the Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979, it is illegal to dig in, or to take, purchase, sell, receive, or transport materials from a site on federal land, without a permit. Similar laws protect state and private lands, and Native American burials. Damage to a site on federal lands that exceeds \$500 is considered a felony and can result in the seizure of any vehicle (car, truck, fishing vessel, plane, RV) used in the crime, fines of up to \$250,000, and up to five years in prison.

What does recreational digging do to an archeological site?

Recreational digging is enormously destructive because much of the information stored in a site is lost when excavation proceeds unscientifically. Artifacts are removed from their location in a site and delicate materials are destroyed. Moreover, artifacts taken for private collections are lost to history. The information they contain cannot be shared with Native people, the scientific community, or the public.

Archeological sites are a non-renewable resource. Once disturbed, they cannot be repaired. Recreational digging is like ripping pages from a history book. It damages the site and limits interpretation.

Can I collect artifacts if I bring them to museum?

No. Most museums cannot accept artifacts collected illegally (i.e., without the permission of the landowner). **This would be equivalent to accepting stolen property.**

What can I do to preserve Alaska's past?

Set a good example. Never dig in an archeological site or collect artifacts except under the guidance of a professional archeologist. **Leave any artifact you find in place** and report it to an archeologist. This will allow the archeologist to contact the landowner about saving the artifact and to document its precise location. Teach your family and friends about the importance of site preservation. Most people have no idea that recreational digging is destructive and illegal. Report acts of site vandalism or illegal artifact trade to the National Park Service (1-800-478-2724) or the Alaska State Troopers. Rewards of up to \$500 are available for information leading to a civil or criminal conviction under the Archaeological Resources Protection Act.